



PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 23, 2003

For Information Contact Public Affairs
HARRIET BERNICK
Telephone: (602) 514-7736
Pager: (602) 356-0004

SMUGGLER SENTENCED TO 4 YEARS PRISON FOR SMUGGLING ALIENS THROUGH THE DESERT RESULTING IN DEATH OF FEMALE

TUCSON, ARIZONA – The United States Attorney's Office for the District of Arizona announced that on December 22, 2003, Jose Ricardo Sanchez-Meraz, date of birth 7/28/83, of Mexico, was sentenced to 50 months in prison by United States District Judge Frank R. Zapata, in Tucson, Arizona.

Sanchez-Meraz had entered a plea of guilty on September 8, 2003, to 5 counts of Bringing In Illegal Aliens for the Purpose of Commercial Advantage or Private Financial Gain and Transportation of Illegal Aliens for the Purpose of Commercial Advantage or Private Financial Gain Resulting in Death, in violation of 8 U.S.C. §§1324(a)(2)(B)(ii), (a)(1)(B)(i) and (a)(1)(B)(iv). The more serious offense carries a statutory maximum term of up to life imprisonment or punishable by death, a \$250,000 fine, and up to five (5) years supervised release.

The charges stemmed from an incident that occurred on June 29, 2003, when the defendant was apprehended with a group of 9 undocumented aliens in the Naco, Arizona, area. All admitted that they had entered the country illegally. Sometime later that morning, U.S. Border Patrol received a report from a

(MORE)

citizen who saw an undocumented alien in distress who stated that he was part of a group of undocumented aliens that were guided into the United States by someone named "Ricardo." The undocumented alien further stated that during the course of their travel, his female cousin had died in the desert. While agents searched the area for the woman's body, the undocumented alien was taken to the Naco U.S. Border Patrol Station whereupon Sanchez-Meraz and his group were being processed. Sanchez-Meraz was identified by the undocumented alien, as well as the 9 members apprehended with Sanchez-Meraz, as the guide who brought them into the United States.

The undocumented aliens stated that they were to pay Sanchez-Meraz certain sums of money to be smuggled into the United States. They all stated that a female member of the group had become ill during the trip. The cousin of the woman stated that during the trip she began vomiting and then went into convulsions. The group then went to a nearby river to obtain water for the woman, but by the time they returned, she had died. The woman's cousin chose to remain with the woman, while the rest of the group continued on and were shortly apprehended by U.S. Border Patrol.

On July 23, 2003, an eight-count indictment was filed against Sanchez-Meraz, in the U.S. District Court in Tucson, Arizona, charging counts of Bringing in Illegal Aliens for the Purpose of Commercial Advantage or Private Financial Gain and Transportation of Illegal Aliens for the Purpose of Commercial Advantage or Private Financial Gain Resulting in Death. On September 8, 2003, Sanchez-Meraz pled guilty to 5 counts of the indictment, dismissal of 3 counts, and no agreement regarding sentencing.

The prosecution was handled by Raquel Arellano and Sandra M. Hansen, Assistant United States Attorneys, District of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona.

CASE NUMBER: CR-03-01445
RELEASE NUMBER: 2003-224

#